

AS DELIVERED

UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell

Second regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board – Opening Statement

1 September 2026

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues ... welcome to the second regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board for 2026.

Thank you to the President and to the Bureau for your continued leadership.

We meet today at a consequential moment — for children, for UNICEF, and for the United Nations.

In recent weeks, disasters have devastated communities from Nepal and China to Colombia, Indonesia, and Venezuela.

Our thoughts are with the children and families who have lost loved ones, homes, and livelihoods. UNICEF is on the ground, and we are doing everything we can to help them recover.

Globally, humanitarian and development needs for children continue to grow, even as the resources available to meet them shrink.

Meanwhile, rapid technological change is transforming childhood itself — bringing extraordinary opportunities ... but also risks that the world must address.

The focus of this year's General Assembly is particularly relevant: a "United Nations that delivers for all." For UNICEF, this means a United Nations that does everything it can to improve the lives of children.

Excellencies ...

As you know well, the UN is in the midst of transformation, and UNICEF is fully engaged in that UN80 process. We see real opportunities to make the United Nations more effective, more coherent, and better equipped for the challenges of the world today. UNICEF brings broad experience, our operational footprint, and the tremendous talent of our people to that effort.

At the global level, UNICEF, WFP, and UNDOS are co-leading work on integrated humanitarian supply chains. New approaches piloted in Afghanistan, Gaza, Haiti, Somalia, and Sudan are already demonstrating savings in transport and logistics costs.

UNICEF is also co-leading work on the UN Data Commons, which will bring together official data from 28 UN entities to give governments a clearer picture of who is being left behind, and where action is needed most.

For UNICEF, UN reform is not an abstract exercise. Its success will be judged by whether children are safer, healthier, better educated, and better able to realize their rights. We are fully committed to this effort.

Excellencies ...

In 1946, in the aftermath of the Second World War, millions of children were hungry, displaced, and facing an uncertain future. In response, the international community made a remarkable choice.

Countries divided by war agreed that a peaceful, prosperous future depended on investing in children. That choice gave birth to UNICEF, and in December of this year, we will mark UNICEF's 80th anniversary.

What began as an emergency fund for children became something more significant: a global commitment to the idea that every child has rights — and that societies are stronger when they invest in children.

Over eight decades, UNICEF has helped drive a revolution in child survival — working with governments and partners to bring simple, proven interventions within reach for millions of families, and saving countless lives in the process.

Vaccines have protected generations of children from diseases that once routinely killed or disabled millions. Oral rehydration therapy transformed the treatment of childhood diarrhoea.

Support for breastfeeding, better nutrition, clean water and sanitation, and stronger primary health care have given millions more children the chance not only to survive their earliest years, but to grow and to thrive.

Together, these efforts have contributed to one of the great achievements of our time: since 1990, the global under-five mortality rate has fallen by 60 per cent.

Behind that figure are millions of children who not only survived but were healthy and educated.

Diseases that once threatened children around the world have been pushed back dramatically. Polio, for example, has been eradicated from all but a few places — bringing the world closer than ever to ending that horrible disease.

UNICEF also helped champion a different understanding of childhood itself: children not simply as people in need, but as individuals with rights.

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 established the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. Since then, UNICEF has worked with governments to translate those rights into laws, policies, and services — from birth registration and education to protection from violence, harmful practices, and the grave violations children face in war.

Throughout those 80 years, humanitarian action has remained a critical part of UNICEF's DNA.

From the children displaced by war in Europe who inspired UNICEF's creation ... to children affected by conflicts and disasters today, UNICEF has always been there — often in some of the world's most difficult places.

None of this progress belongs to UNICEF alone.

It belongs to governments that invested in children and in the systems that support them ... to health workers, teachers, and social workers ... to communities and civil society ... to our United Nations partners ... to donors, businesses, our UNICEF National Committees, and millions of individual supporters ... and, of course, to children and young people themselves.

Our experience provides an important lesson for all of us. That humanitarian action is indispensable, but so too is the sustained and very hard work of development — strengthening health and education systems, expanding access to water and sanitation, improving nutrition and social protection, and helping governments invest in their youngest citizens.

For 80 years, UNICEF has accompanied countries on that development journey.

Excellencies ...

Children today face challenges and opportunities that the founders of UNICEF could only have imagined. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the areas of digital technology and artificial intelligence.

AI has extraordinary potential for children — widening access to knowledge, helping children with disabilities, supporting learning, and bringing information and services to communities historically left behind.

But opportunities without safeguards can deepen inequality and cause harm.

We have a responsibility to shape those systems now. We cannot repeat the mistakes made with social media — responding to harms only after they have become deeply embedded.

That means safety by design. Safeguarding children from online sexual abuse. Protecting children's data. Ensuring that AI in schools, health systems and other services advances children's development. And giving children a voice in decisions about technologies that shape their future.

UNICEF is helping to move this agenda forward.

Earlier this year, we worked with the G7 to establish the first common principles addressing children and the digital environment. And in July, UNICEF brought a child-rights perspective to the first Global Dialogue on AI Governance in Geneva — advocating for children's rights and safety to be built into AI governance, and for children themselves to have a voice in shaping it. Mr. President, I want to recognize your leadership in helping to convene that important Dialogue.

Beyond AI, the development agenda faces other significant challenges.

Today, 273 million children and young people are out of school, while hundreds of millions more are in school but not acquiring the foundational skills they need. We must urgently tackle this learning

crisis — and ensure that technology strengthens, rather than substitutes for, investment in teachers and education systems.

We must also accelerate progress on safe water and sanitation. Today, 2.1 billion people still lack safe drinking water, while 3.4 billion lack adequate sanitation which puts them at risk of terrible diseases like cholera. The UN Water Conference this December is an important opportunity to accelerate action on these services which are fundamental to children's health, dignity, and development.

In addition, we must confront the scourge of violence against children. More than half of the world's children experience some form of violence every year — in their homes, schools, communities, and increasingly online. The consequences can follow children throughout their lives.

At the same time, environmental threats — from extreme heat and air pollution to contaminated water and toxic substances — are having a growing impact on children's health and development.

These challenges vary, but the lesson of the last 80 years applies to all of them: lasting progress comes from strong partnership and sustained investment in the systems that children depend on.

Excellencies ...

For some children, the threats they face every day are immediate and life-threatening.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, children are confronting the country's worst Ebola outbreak on record. More than 300 children have died. And the impact of the deadly disease goes far beyond the immediate physical consequences.

In the outbreak's hotspots, use of essential health services fell by more than 40 per cent between April and June. Routine childhood vaccinations have sharply declined, while maternal health care and other essential services have also been disrupted.

UNICEF is working with the Government, WHO, Africa CDC, and other partners to contain the outbreak, and to keep health facilities safe and functioning — maintaining the services children and families depend on.

Our teams are also responding to immense humanitarian needs in the State of Palestine and across the Middle East, in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan, in Myanmar, Nepal, Ukraine, Yemen ... and in other crises around the world ... UNICEF is providing emergency health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education and protection support. This work is made possible through the incredible dedication and sacrifice made by UNICEF staff on the ground in these challenging environments.

Keeping in mind the lessons of the last 80 years, we must look beyond immediate response to what comes next. We must respond to crises while planting the seeds for future recovery and development.

In Syria and Venezuela, UNICEF is supporting children and communities as they recover and rebuild. And in Lebanon and Gaza, recovery and reconstruction will be essential to restoring the basic services and systems children desperately need.

If we get these transitions right, they can become opportunities for hope — to rebuild not simply what existed before, but stronger, more resilient systems for children.

However, in many places, our humanitarian action faces fundamental constraints.

We cannot reach children when access is denied. We cannot sustain lifesaving services without adequate resources. And humanitarian action requires respect by all parties for their obligations under international law.

Children and civilian infrastructure must be protected. Humanitarian workers must be able to reach children safely. And parties to conflict must uphold their obligations under international law.

Excellencies ...

Our ability to deliver in both humanitarian and development settings is being tested by an increasingly difficult funding environment.

Core resources from our public-sector partners fell by 31 per cent between 2024 and 2025 alone, reaching the lowest level in UNICEF's history.

This matters because core resources are the foundation on which much of UNICEF's work is built.

Core resources sustain the expertise and country presence that allow us to help governments strengthen systems, manage risks, and deliver results. They give us the flexibility to allocate resources where the potential impact for children is greatest, and to leverage additional resources and partnerships around national priorities.

That responsibility also extends to how we govern UNICEF itself. We must continually strengthen the systems that support sound decision-making, compliance, and effective risk management. To that end, we are establishing a new governance team, which will bring together and strengthen key functions supporting internal governance and regulatory oversight.

The current trajectory of core resources concerns me deeply. But we do see some positive signs.

Denmark recently announced that it will triple its core-resource contribution to UNICEF and become a donor to our Global Humanitarian Thematic Fund. Japan has increased its core resources by more than half, while Luxembourg and Iceland have also announced increases in 2026. We are enormously grateful for this leadership.

I am also pleased to report that private-sector core resources are outperforming expectations. To our National Committees, whose fundraising and advocacy help drive that extraordinary support — a huge thank you.

And thank you as well to all our partners who give UNICEF the trust and flexibility to direct resources where they can achieve the greatest results for children.

We will consider both the structured funding dialogue and our updated financial estimates during this Board session.

I hope those discussions reaffirm a simple principle: ambition for children must be matched by the quality as well as the quantity of resources. Because cutting investment in children does not make their needs disappear. It merely shifts the cost into the future — into weaker health and education systems, greater inequality, instability, and lost human potential.

Excellencies ...

Eighty years ago, the world stood at a crossroads. Leaders emerging from devastating conflict made a choice: that the lives and futures of children were worth protecting. We have seen the dividends of that commitment.

We stand at another crossroads today. The fundamental question is remarkably similar. What kind of future will we choose?

Will we allow decades of progress for children to stall? Or will we invest in the systems that make it possible for children to survive and thrive?

Will technology deepen inequality and expose children to new harms? Or will we shape it around their rights, safety, and potential?

UNICEF's 80th anniversary is not simply a moment to look back. It is a responsibility to look forward. The future is not something that simply happens to us. It is built — decision by decision, investment by investment, partnership by partnership.

Our responsibility is to choose wisely. To choose children. To choose investment in their futures. And to support a United Nations that delivers for every child.

Thank you.